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PROMISES AND PUZZLES, THE PLIGHT OF THE INNER-CITY.

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EMPHASIS ON THE PROBLEMS OF TEACHING CULTURALLY DISADVANTAGED PUPILS HAS ONLY MADE THE TASK OF THE INNER-CITY TEACHER MORE DIFFICULT, AND HAS CREATED CONFUSION IN THE SCHOOLS REGARDING THE MEANS AND ENDS OF EDUCATION. NEGATIVE IDENTIFICATION OF THE SCHOOL AS THE PRIMARY VEHICLE FOR OVERCOMING CULTURAL GAPS AND WEAKNESSES MAY BE PARTIALLY DUE TO THE IRRESPONSIBILITY OF POLITICAL PRESSURE GROUPS AND OTHER SOCIAL ORGANIZATIONS. FOCUS ON THE POSITIVE ASSETS THAT BOTH TEACHERS AND PUPILS BRING TO INNER-CITY SCHOOLS IS ESSENTIAL FOR EDUCATIONAL SUCCESS. THIS ARTICLE WAS PUBLISHED IN "EDUCATIONAL LEADERSHIP," VOLUME 25, NUMBER 1, OCTOBER 1967. (AF)

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Successful programs are not built upon purported weakness and handicap.

Promises and Puzzles: The Plight of the Inner-city

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Prologue

WHEN the achievements of our culture are written by future historians, two pervasive ideals will be noted in an account of that history. First it will be recognized that our culture placed a premium on the value of diversity among individuals and groups; and second, that we honored the worth and dignity of the individual person. Historians will note that no culture succeeded quite as well as ours in fulfilling the requirements of such ideals.

It will also be noted that in the 1960s a period of turmoil and conflict arose within the broader culture and within the institution of education itself. It was during this time that profound economic and social changes were proposed by ambitious politicians, self-righteous minority groups, appointed bureaucrats and militant organizations whose self-appointed role was to serve the "common good." While their efforts were often disparate, these many-splendored and -splintered groups appeared to share at least one single-minded view: since education had long served to upgrade the continuous improvement of the culture, it was obvious that the school should be identified as the primary vehicle for bringing about social change, economic improvement and the good life.

For after all, the school in an earlier day had done much to make the melting pot of America a living reality. Therefore, once again the historians will record that it was natural to charge the school with the responsibility of achieving integration, overcoming cultural deprivation and providing a full education for all.

Narrative

In the school's traditional unwillingness to admit that it might not be able to achieve everything, genuine difficulties arise in identifying their proper task. Having no criteria by which to judge the value of proposed programs, the school has a tendency to choose as its relevant functions the very gaps and

shortcomings that prevail in the culture. This is especially true when schools undertake programs that result from political and economic pressures. The real problem arises, however, when the school minimizes the fact that an existence of widespread confusion within the culture can lead to uncertainty in the schools regarding the means, ends and values of education.

Although the question of how to improve the lot of society is not often asked of schoolmen, the promises and puzzles of improving the cultural ways of life for all are still assumed to be the schools' business. Therefore, for the past few years the direction of educational revolution has been focused on the so-called lower class youngster of the inner-city, on the racially discriminated-against Negro in the North and South and on the economically poor who reside everywhere. All of these deprived persons, it must be admitted, are, in fact, in desperate need of equal educational opportunity and social reconstruction.

To meet the urgency of such cultural problems the schools began to initiate conferences, institutes, workshops and in-service programs for the purpose of acquainting teachers with the perplexities of teaching these students. All of this activity was undertaken in spite of the fact that teachers had long since worked with these youngsters. Somehow the children and youth of the inner-city and elsewhere were different now. This approach may have been necessary for some school systems, however, for this tack may be the way a school reminds itself of the severity and seriousness of a problem. And to be sure, there was ample encouragement both financial and admonitory from the many forms of federal government, from public and community agencies and from private organizations.

Many of these newly prepared teachers were referred to as Title I teachers, inner-city classroom teachers, teachers of the culturally deprived, teachers of the disadvantaged, teachers of the culturally different, etc. While these teachers were reminded again and again that no precise models or methods were available for what they would need to do, one conclusion was always omnipresent in their minds: their values were middle class while the values of their students were not. Many teachers can vouch for the fact that even though this conclusion is not a remarkable one, it was all they had as a major source of direction for classroom teaching.

Acknowledging the need to recognize this difference does not guarantee its understanding in practice, nor does it achieve little else other than to cause teachers to feel more inadequate. For it is patently clear that the dilemma has been far more eloquently emphasized than understood. The problem has not been that teachers cared too little, but rather that they lacked the power to mobilize their abilities to teach in the face of such dire predictions; that is, failure is assured if you as a teacher persist in being what you are.

Is it any wonder that admonishments such as these have served merely to alienate many teachers from themselves as well as from the very young they were to instruct? No more poignant question is asked by teachers today in university courses and in-service activities than: How can I relate effectively to culturally different youngsters when I have been led to a sense of shame and

guilt over my own value orientation? As in Socrates' time it may be that teachers become suspect when the culture becomes unsure of itself.

In a word, when schools seem uncertain of an appropriate course of action in matters of curriculum and instruction, they tend to become negative rather than positive; they tend to reflect puzzled bewilderment rather than firm alacrity. If the dilemma posed does not support the foregoing statement, there is sufficient evidence that negativism has also been ascribed to the students themselves. While it is perfectly clear that many so-called disadvantaged youngsters do suffer from genuine deprivations, it is also obvious that programs are not built upon purported weakness and handicap.

What have been the most frequently discussed descriptions of these youngsters? A few examples are: they lack an educational tradition in the home; they are anti-intellectual; they have insufficient language and reading skills; they are inadequately motivated to pursue long-range goals; they have poor estimates of themselves; they experience antagonism toward the school and the teacher; they feel powerless, helpless, alienated, angry and hopeless; they are the predictable dropouts of the school and the future delinquents of society. Since family, peer group, ethnic and racial backgrounds conspire to play a fundamental part in shaping the character of these individuals, the mold is set and the condition inevitable. Such a negative outlook might proceed unrewarded, if it received far less attention.

The magnificent naïveté of it all is that teachers who have been previously conditioned to classify youngsters as high achievers, average and slow learners (academic distinctions), or as gifted, bright, creative and exceptional (intellectual distinctions), are now asked to possess categories of mind based on socioeconomic-cultural distinctions. While a knowledge of social class difference may represent significant data, no ready-made program of action can be built upon such information. Many teachers are rapidly learning that it is far too easy to become trapped in a quagmire of confusion and doubt when the conditions of schooling are described in negative overtones. They intuitively realize that constructive efforts must be based on the realistic resources of the teacher and the positive possibilities of the student, not the ineptness of the former and the inadequacy of the latter.

For indeed, how could these two parties, teacher and student, proceed with any chance of success when the harbingers of failure and pessimism are taken seriously? Given this negative account of each party, to expect success is to explain a paradox that would defy the sages. For here are teachers who are supposed to be unpracticed and unprepared to teach the disadvantaged bringing the miracles of learning to youngsters who are unready and unrehearsed to appreciate the benefits of an education.

Only in an idealistic culture with the accomplishment of the impossible expected could such an implausible achievement ever become reality. Yet the miracle is happening and the sheer idea of it is staggering. For it has been the teacher with the positive view of self and others and with the built-in mission to succeed in spite of imposed handicaps who has made the vision of

an education for these youngsters a living reality.

Epilogue

Teachers have modified their outlook to a more positive view, with or without the benefit of those who appoint themselves as help-agents. These teachers quite fortunately did not succumb to the persuasiveness of those who chose to emphasize the burdens and barriers of living and teaching in culturally different worlds. Discussions and observations of successful teachers in the Hough area of Cleveland and in the Appalachian region of West Virginia and Kentucky suggest that they choose to view positively the prospect of these youngsters rather than to lament their background and deficiencies. A dialogue with these teachers generates excitement and enthusiasm about themselves and their students because they view with favor the possibilities of the present and the hopes of the future.

If the school is succeeding in providing an education for all, then it is proceeding on the basis of a more positive note than has been heretofore acknowledged. The ideals of dignity and respect for individuals and groups is a positive conception, not a negative one. The current vogue is to expect the school to bridge the gap between the culture's realities and its aspirations.

The school is not, however, receiving direction and support from self-appointed groups whose avowed purpose is to facilitate the efforts of education. For it is the spokesmen from both without and within the educational enterprise who point with alarm to the shortcomings and weaknesses of teachers and students. Overlooked in the dialogue stand many teachers who have not lost sight of the great American dream and whose efforts are making the puzzle of the paradox somehow explainable through their commitments to themselves and to students.

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